

## Women In Leadership

### 102 Conversations with Remarkable Women Leaders

*by Jon Craighead*

Last year we at Craighead Associates spent September through December interviewing successful women leaders for a project we called “Women in Leadership.” The original intent of the project was to generate ideas for designing a leadership program for women; however, when we completed the interview phase we came away with a very different conclusion regarding the need for such a program. We discovered some startling surprises and new ideas for the promotion of effective leadership.

I would like to share with you some serendipitous findings that resulted from these interviews. The first was the amount of talent that was wasted because of short-sighted rules and mores. Many of the women in the senior age groups were offered three career options: secretary, teaching, or nursing. Some determined women ignored these artificial boundaries; however, many acquiesced and took a narrower path than that which would have more fully used their talents. Given the absence of powerful leadership at all levels, it is clear that this is a waste we can not afford. I was particularly moved by the spunk and determination that many participants demonstrated in their progress from secure positions to more risky entrepreneurial status with little resources and even less support.

Many of the participants not only entered new fields of endeavor but had additional responsibilities of raising children, maintaining a household, and often instances of eldercare along with coping with the perplexities of starting a business or working full time. It is still true today that many young women choose careers that will permit marriage and child bearing. These are careers that may not be their first choice but allow the broadest menu of options. I think it’s appropriate to make it clear that we are not making a moral judgment on what is right or wrong but focusing on the principle of freedom of choice. In the report we quoted a great article written in 2007 in the Harvard Business Review titled “Women and the Labyrinth of Leadership” which goes beyond the “glass ceiling” concept and speaks to the collection of barriers and obstructions that women confront all the way along the path to the highest levels of leadership. An example: when a child is sick at school, it is the mother who is normally called and who, regardless of whatever she’s in the midst of, has to leave to pick up the child. There are many senior leaders and organizations who take these kinds of situations into consideration when it comes to promotion and/or partnership

opportunities. Unfortunately, these subtle influences are far more often borne by women than by their male counterparts.

Our greatest tribute to our project participants is directed to their perseverance to become leaders in their fields despite obstacles – to become industry pathfinders and lead with innovation and quality, while bringing their unique perspectives to making the greatest possible difference. Many spoke highly of forward thinking male mentors who provided insight and support and made seminal contributions. Conversely, many had unpleasant experiences as they proceeded through their career paths. While I bristled listening to some of these experiences, again, I felt the greatest disappointment for the loss of leadership so much needed.

A very surprising outcome for us was the discovery that the conversations of native and long time residents of Northeastern Pennsylvania were indistinguishable from those of the women we spoke with across the country. Our interviews included women in 10 states outside of Pennsylvania, ranging from California to New York and from Massachusetts to Florida and Texas. While unanticipated, this insight provided a sense of hope. I am happy to say we all share a great commonality in our commitment to bring workability and success to our lives, families, and businesses.

I have come away from this project with a renewed and even stronger conviction that we are all unique while simultaneously the same, and that it is the melding together of our qualities and talents and working in harmony which creates a platform to overcome any challenges before us. It is my hope that the project creates an opening for others who are committed generally to bringing about more effective leadership, whether it is in our businesses, our government, our communities, and within our families. It can take any number of a variety of forms. I welcome any thoughts or recommendations you may have.